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A.NOLEN

Assaulting Mt. Helicon: Writing and Current Affairs.

monthly archives: DECEMBER 2012

THE HOUSE

The House, The Korean Academy of Film Arts, 2011.

I've lived in a number of different places, and there are a few widely held misconceptions about East Asia. These misconceptions are almost universally flattering (from a Western perspective, at least): the Far East is filled with smart, tidy, well-mannered people who are respectful of their elders and neighbors. They live in shiny, new high-rises decorated in 'zen' style; a sort of IKEA-inspired Scandinavian-Japanese fusion.

This is just not the case. The real East Asia is much different, and that's why I like *The House* so much. This Korean-language movie depicts life in the Far East as I experienced it, warts and all.

In most of East Asia, tastes in furniture tend to run Louis XIV, rather than IKEA. Expect heavy gold frames, ornate wall-paper and bold colors. In fact, the aesthetic is similar to what you'll typically find in Russia. (Excluding perhaps, Japan.)

There are other similarities to Russia; in Korea/Japan/China there is a culture of heavy drinking, especially in Korea. In fact, I've met Korean women who could easily drink *any* of my Russian friends under the table.

In the East Asian cities that I've been to, it's not nice to be elderly. An elderly person is more likely to be shoved aside than have a door opened for them. The cities aren't particularly clean, either. Trash from open-air markets accumulates on the streets and the sewers often leak.

This is true even for places like Singapore, despite efforts by the S'pore tourism authority to distance the island's image from the way Singaporeans actually live. Families are crowded into small apartments and communities are gated, even the poorest ones.

So, life is more gritty, more interesting, than the typical stereotypes would lead you to believe. I often wonder how these stereotypes got started in the first place; my guess is that missionaries (both home and abroad), as well as tourism boards, have a lot to do with it.

But *The House* breaks through all of that nonsense, and gets down to the charming human element, with all of its angst, superstition and pigheadedness.

The House's plot revolves around a young lady, Miss Ban, who recently lost her money in a financial crisis. Out of desperation, she rooms with a slovenly friend in a dilapidated neighborhood, but dreams of wealth and happiness in a palatial home. Miss Ban has nothing but contempt for poverty and superstition.

Then, Miss Ban finds a magic bracelet and can suddenly see the house-spirits that protect each dwelling in her neighborhood. They are a loveable, motley group of ghosts, terrified that they will be destroyed when the neighborhood is razed in favor of a high-rise. To make m

worse, the ghosts are desperate to find their leader, the God of Land, who was inadvertently kicked out of our dimension by some landscapers.

Miss Ban never grows out of her desire for money, but she learns to appreciate the guardian spirits for what they are and she confronts her reasons for always wanting something new and better.

The film looks at other issues too, like the crushing cycle of debt associated with ever bigger, newer homes; the displacement of the working poor; the political corruption associated with property development; the loss of traditional beliefs.

The House was produced by The Korean Academy of Film Arts, and it seems that the same five people directed, animated and wrote the screenplay for the film. (Get a full list here.)

This is a thoughtful, beautiful film that deserves more exposure than it's gotten so far; but you can find it on Netflix! Warning: Netflix has *The House* categorized as a children's movie, it isn't.

LEAVE A COMMENT

RARE EXPORTS

The days are short and the wind carries a merry jingle, so it's time to see what goodies Netflix has on offer for the season…

Rare Exports is a Christmas story like no other. It's frightening, but kids will find it empowering as well– I know that I would have, all those years back in the 80s.

Why is a movie about Santa Claus frightening? Because Santa isn't the jolly red elf that Coca-Cola would like you to believe he is. Santa has a much longer, much darker history than that; a history that modern children would do well to think about, which is probably why I love this movie.

Synopsis: A boy and his father overcome tragedy while saving the world from a pagan demi-god, who wise Saami ancestors buried, and who a crazy American wants to dig up. (Brrring, Brrring!)

There's a twist: because Evil-Santa was buried just over the Russian border with Finland, the evil-elves must rip through the border fence to wreak havoc on civilization, leading the Finnish villagers to blame Russkie raiding parties for unexplainable thefts and mutilated livestock… but the truth is much more grim. It takes the capture of an elf– an elf who looks more like Koschei the Deathless than Hermey– for the village to galvanize into action.

This was an intense movie, maybe too scary for really young children. But the boy-hero overcomes his own fear to save everyone in the village, and then everybody works together to turn lemons into lemonade…

Rare Exports is directed by brother-duo Jelmari and Juuso Helander. (Why are so many good movies made by brother duos?) The brothers also wrote the script.

This isn't the first incarnation of the Helanders' idea. A short version was released online by Woodpecker Film in 2003, and a sequel was released in 2005.

The film is partly in Finnish, partly in English, but that doesn't make the story drag. The acting is superb too. *Rare Exports: A Christmas Story* is great entertainment, especially if your connection with the holiday goes deeper than the tree.

LEAVE A COMMENT

MUSTARD

Thanks to ukmagic.co.uk

A few weeks ago the BBC's *Food Programme* (Channel 4) aired its final episode in a series on spices, the episode is titled "Mustard". You can download it for free through iTunes.

Mustard is a source of national pride in the U.K.; their brand "Coleman's" is comparable to "French's" in the United States, though Coleman's has more of a kick and I like it better.

Well, the U.K.'s mustard crop failed in 2007. Not only that, but yields were halving every year and nobody knew why. Things were so bad that the number of mustard-growers fell to 11. All of these farmers grow mustard for one buyer: Coleman's.

Back before Coleman's was bought by Unilever, the manufacturer kept its own stable of in-house scientists who would develop new mustard strands and monitor plant health. All that went out the window– was 'rationalized'– when Coleman's was sold. (Why was Coleman's sold? It's hard to say, but it's owner, Reckitt & Colman binged on American assets prior to the sale; American assets including French's Mustard.)

So the U.K. mustard industry was neglected by it's new owner, Unilever, and the industry was run into the ground by one of those multinationals that are supposed to make our lives better.

So what did the farmers do? The only thing that little guys can do- they organized a cooperative and hired their own scientist to investigate why yields had fallen.

"Although we are the growers," said Mr. Michael Sly, head of the mustard-growing cooperative, "we feel that morally we own the brand, although financially we don't."

"We thought: We're not going to just give in without giving it a go and giving it a fight. Bear in mind that most of those growers who are left, their families have been growing it for 100, 140 years," Mr. Sly continued. "It was too easy to say, 'Alright, that's it!' It was the harder decision to say, 'Let's give it a go.'"

The cooperative was able to compare modern seed to seed that was saved from before Unilever's acquisition of Coleman's, which isolated the problem. (Unilever was too cheap to even preserve seed samples.)

As it turns out, mustard needs several varieties of mustard-plants to reproduce true to form. Since only the largest seeds were being saved, vital genetic material was lost, ultimately destroying yields. Thanks to the foresight of Coleman's previous owners and scientists, mustard is still a viable crop in the U.K. Thanks to investment by the little-guy producers, the yield problem was identified and a tech-based solution was found.

Where were the smart, competitive finance-men? Speculating on natural resources?

By the way, mustard is an important crop for rotation farming; that's the type of farming which diminishes farmers' dependence on oil-based fertilizers…

Naturally, the BBC downplays the disastrous effect globalization had on mustard production– one of Old England's cherished traditions– but, *at least they mentioned it*. I'm sure that mustard is not the only British foodstuff to be adversely affected by globalization; from my own experience in the U.K., the quality of fruits like apples has also nose-dived.

The irony of all this is that it was the mustard-cooperative members' foresight and commitment which saved a profitable business. The little, committed guys took the risk and made the tough decisions. I wonder if Mr. Sly and his partners earn as much as the brand managers at Unilever…

My solution? Buy from people you know; and if you don't know anybody, it's time to broaden your circle.

1 COMMENT

MY FRIEND ASMODEUS

My Friend Asmodeus, by Nathan Barnes.

My Friend Asmodeus is about an every-day guy who teams up with a demon in order to rule the world. I chose 'every-day' carefully, because he's really no more evil than most people, he's just given the opportunity to act out his frustrations. The book is a satire of modern life and relationships– if you're into manosphere blogs you will love this book.

I found *My Friend Asmodeus* through *Digital Book Today's* list of free Amazon ebooks. I was drawn to it by its devil-smiley-face cover, which screamed 'irreverent'; I love irreverent.

My Friend Asmodeus has a fantastic premise and many people will identify with the hero, William, who is stuck in a dead-end job, betrayed by his girlfriend, disrespected… a thoroughly 'beta' individual. William becomes powerful by disregarding society's rules. The brilliant twist to this story is that Asmodeus (the demon) abandons Will just before Will becomes a demagogue, leaving Will to face punishment on his own. Will doesn't regain his devil-friend until he's in jail and being… you guessed it.

Which brings me to the not-so-hotso aspects of this book. Barnes is an excellent writer, but key aspects of *My Friend Asmodeus* are a little hackneyed. Will recruits followers at *the* nexus of human despair– here it comes– the DMV. (The Department of Motor Vehicles is a branch of state government in the USA, which is usually poorly-run and frustrating to visit.) William uses his power to make girls take off their shirts; beat up larger men and detect who has a hard-on or venereal disease. You'll find the usual red-neck stereotypes, along with some others. And of course, the staple of youth-oriented comedy, prison gang-rape.

I love the premise of *My Friend Asmodeus*, but Barnes could have said more if he'd thought outside the box on the details. This predictability may be a conscious attempt by Barnes to court the *Comedy Central* crowd, but my tastes run rarer. In my opinion, this story should be laid down ten years in an oak casket, then re-bottled so we can enjoy its more complex nuances.

But that's the worst I'm going to say about *My Friend Asmodeus*, because it is an inspired book- Barnes' reflections on the nature of good and evil are interesting. I particularly like his observation that "One sided creation is masturbation," which takes on multiple meanings when you find out who says it. Oh yeah, and angels aren't always nice. (3.5/5)

LEAVE A COMMENT

LEAVE A COMMENT

HAUNT, PART V

This is part V of a serialized story, see part I, part II , part III and part IV.

"They're letting me out this afternoon." The skin on Tim's toes was damaged by the cold, but his hypothermia wasn't severe, and after holding him one night in the hospital the doctor cleared Tim's release.

"That's great honey, we should go visit Margo- she's been such a help with Elsie." Fiona had spent the night on the couch in her husband's room.

"What about your medicine?"

"Oh, yes, I forgot all about it," Fiona felt a sweet moment of relief when she realized that she'd made it through her husband's ordeal without it. *It might just be the adrenaline*, she thought and resolved to pick up the pills after dropping Tim off at his aunt's house.

"I don't think I want to visit, Fi. Let's just go home," the thought of talking filled him with dread: all the questions about his accident and blackout; his aunt's natural flakiness; the advice she'd try to give him… The effort would drain him.

"It's important Tim. I know you don't want to, but it's important to me."

Tim looked over at his wife. She was tired and haggard-looking. Could he do this one last thing to put her mind at ease?

"Alright, but for no more than an hour, please."

"Okay, just an hour."

***

Tim sat at the oak table in his aunt's farmhouse kitchen. He traced burn marks on the wooden tabletop with his finger; they had a smooth oily feel. Dry bunches of flowers hung from the kitchen ceiling; the stove sat in a brick-lined recession, which met the ceiling under a Normanesque arch. That arch was originally part of a fireplace, and when Tim was a child, he imagined a cauldron of Aunt Margo's herbs bubbling over the bricks.

But now, a teakettle bubbled on the range. His aunt poured him a cup.

"German chamomile," she said, "Collected from the old gravel way in the pasture. Do you remember playing in that pasture, Tim?"

He did, but not clearly. Tim wasn't sure if the memory had faded, or if he was just too tired to think. Fiona had left for their home after dropping him off at Margo's; she would be back to get him in an hour. Elsie was asleep in the adjacent room. Tim took in a breath full of warm, moist, pasture-flower. It's round sent relaxed his neck and dissolved some of the tension behind his eyes.

"I'm just so tired, Marge. I'm sorry, but I've got to get some sleep."

"That's why it's important you don't."

"What?" Tim had an uneasy feeling that Aunt Margo was about to pull him into something; something that he didn't want to be pulled into *again*.

The incident happened after Margo's husband died. Margo met Byron Davies, the brother of Tim's father, while working as his accountant in the 1960s. She was one of the few women in town with a degree, and continued to work even after she and Byron married. This gave her a cosmopolitan edge, and she was invited to the bank and school boards– Margo was a force in the community.

Then Byron died and Margo quit working. She didn't have to work anymore: they owned their home; had no children and Byron's insurance policies were enough to keep Margo comfortably for the rest of her life. At first, people thought that the shock of losing her husband so young had knocked Margo off-balance; even the strongest, most level-headed of people are crushed after losing a spouse.

The thing is, Margo didn't show any signs of despair. She hardly ever went out, but when she did, she seemed genuinely happy. Rumors circulated: *Did she kill Byron? Was it for the money?* No one really believed any of that though, Margo loved her husband, she didn't need cash and even if she did, Margo enjoyed working. Things didn't become clear until one day when Margo stopped in for pie at the Counter Cafe.

"Hello, Marge. How are you today?" Margo and the waitress, Priscilla, went to high school together.

"Oh, great, Pris. The garden's really coming in well." Margo was almost giddy.

"You know, Marge, I admire your resilience, after everything that happened. I don't think I could be that strong."

Margo just giggled when she heard that. Priscilla's husband had left her several years ago; Pris was a *very* resilient person.

Priscilla stopped pouring her coffee. *Is Margo mocking me?* Priscilla studied her high-school friend for a few minutes, weighing her up. *She always did think she was superior.*

Margo saw the look in her friends eyes and giggled again: "No, no. It's not like that at all. You see, *he hasn't really left me*."

"What?" *Margo is crazy,* Pris thought and suddenly felt guilty for thinking ill of her.

"He's still around Pris. I talk to him on the ouija board that I bought for Tim."

Pris remembered how those had been popular last Christmas; how all the fashionable couples bought them for their children. She always thought that they were a strange gift to give a child.

"Maybe now isn't the right time to play with that stuff, Marge. I mean, it's just a game."

"But it isn't, Priscilla, it isn't."

'Byron' would tell things to Aunt Margo. Things that would sometimes come true; things that never came true; and some things that only came true if you looked at them a certain way. But the ouija board

was right often enough that Aunt Margo developed a small following of women in the town, women like Priscilla, who were desperate for a little bit of hope.

Margo never charged for the ouija's services, so when things went wrong, people weren't inclined to think ill of her, but only to shake their heads and say: "Should've never dabbled in that stuff."

Talking to Byron through the ouija had certain side effects. Things would disappear in Margo's house, then reappear in unlikely places, for instance, one morning she found her china neatly stacked in the bathtub. There would also be messages, or as Aunt Margo called them, 'misplaced messages': notes were found behind picture frames or under tiles. These short letters were written in unfamiliar handwriting and addressed to people Margo didn't know.

"The milk went sour, so I burned it," read one.

"Not today, Tabitha," read another.

These little happenings were innocuous, until that special day when Tim visited his Aunt. He was about six years old.

"What are you doing Tim?" Aunt Margo put her ear to the bathroom door, which was locked. She heard the faucet running full blast, and could feel steam leaking out through the cracks around the door. Tim liked to make potions out of her face cream and makeup.

"Just playing."

"Then can I come in? I need to get my brush."

"No. He doesn't want you to."

"Who?"

"The elf I'm playing with."

"Now come on Tim, open the door. I've got visitors coming in a few minutes and my hair is a mess."

"No."

Margo was indulgent with her nephew, to the point of spoiling him, but she wasn't in the mood for this today. She fetched the spare key from her bedroom, then unlocked the bathroom door. A burst of steam clouded her vision. As the hot air escaped the room, she saw writing in the condensation on the bathroom mirror. The message disappeared as she read it, they were pleas of some sort, she caught the word 'poisoning' and was suddenly afraid. Tim began to howl and put his hands over his ears.

"Timothy! Timothy! Listen to me!" Tim was crying uncontrollably. He was also bleeding from his ears.

Margo bundled her nephew out of the room and into her car; Tim didn't stop crying until they were in the emergency room. The doctor there said Tim had a mild ear infection and gave him a course of antibiotics.

After the bathroom incident, Margo put the ouija board away. She stopped talking to Byron and her fans went elsewhere for spiritual solace. Nothing unusual happened in the house after that, Tim and Margo never talked about the incident, and soon the event faded in Tim's memory so that he wasn't even scared to visit his aunt. Margo was very thankful for that.

***

First Haunt flub- I've changed things so that Elsie can talk now, which I guess makes her about nine months older than I originally intended! Oh, well…

LEAVE A COMMENT

HAUNT, PART IV

This is part IV of a serialized story, see part I, part II and part III.

That night Elsie had strange dreams. The Gothic windows of her great aunt's parlor loomed before her. Their glass shone with crazy colors

instead of the clear, warped panes that she knew from before. Fair-music bellowed from a nearby room; an unknown lady in red velvet caught Elsie up from behind, spinning her around like a carousel, grinning, and every so often planting a clammy red kiss on the toddler's cheek. The lady's wrinkled lips parted for a blast of guttural baby-blabble; her breath smelled like the outside of the grocery store- the place where mom never lingered, where skinny people drank and lit matches.

"WhatapreetygirlWhooooooooo!" Again the old lady spun Elsie, the music got louder and louder, "Daddysprettylittlelady…" Elsie cried out.

Click.

The lights went on around Elsie's cradle and the warm, dry arms of her Great Aunt Margo scooped her up, blankets and all.

"What's the matter little one?" Elsie's eyes blinked and she pushed her face into her Aunt's chest, the sudden electric glare was too much. Dreams, a new room, no mom- it was all just too much. Elsie began to sob.

"There was a lady and she was going too fast," Elsie murmured, "I want mom."
"I know, I know, princess." Her aunt smoothed the hair on the child's forehead. "Mom will be here tomorrow, she's helping daddy now." Margo held the child and rocked her gently until she went back to sleep.

"I'll talk to daddy tomorrow, sweetheart," her Aunt whispered.

***
"It's not every day that we're fortunate to have such a distinguished guest here with us- *all the way from China*– with us here at the Armory. It really is an honor."

An aging man with a large, humble smile shuffled on stage. The man was thin, except for a pot belly, and tidily dressed in loose clothes. His hair was cropped jar-head style; his neck curved like a stork.

"Mr. Jiang is with us all the way from his hometown of Xi'an, where he's already an acclaimed artist." The Master of Ceremonies paused to glance at his notes on the podium, "Mr. Jiang's works grace the local administrative offices in Xi'an, as well as Nike's and Carrefour's base of operations there."

Mr. Jiang looked out towards the crowd and blinked; all he could see were the bright lights, but he could hear the audience's gentle applause. Each person in that crowd had set down their drinks to welcome him to this American stage. So many people, so much admiration, what could he do? The artist grinned and nodded in a self-depreciating way.

How did Mr. Jiang and his two young benefactors, Alex Greene and Tim Davies, find themselves at the center of attention on this exalted night? Several months before, in a drawing room in Schaumburg…

"Nobody's doing medieval. Try medieval." Mr. Greene pulled down a hard-covered book, the size of a tea-tray, from his office shelf. The gorgeous dust-jacket was so shiny that it stuck to the books beside it. Mr. Greene thumbed through the pages until he found what he was looking for, then announced, "Giotto, gotta do Giotto."

Mr. Greene held up the book for his son and Tim to see. Behind the glare of the study lights, a large image of *The Kiss of Judas* was spread across its pages.

"I'll give my guy in China a call, have him do twelve like Giotto for you. But it'll be better- I'll tell him Giotto-style, but with contemporary Chinese images. This'll be *art*."

And art it was. Two months later, Mr. Jiang's paintings arrived in a large *Evergreen* shipping container. The bright colors sang from behind their newspaper padding. The paintings must not have been quite dry when they were packed, because the newsprint stuck to a few of them, leaving the ghost of Chinese characters wherever the surface was white or yellow.

"That's fine," said Alex, "gives them an urban grittiness."

The paintings hung on white walls in Alex and Tim's Off-Gold-Coast gallery; each one bathed in diffuse light so that from the night-time street outside, the paintings shone like fairy-lights. Next to each picture hung a little cream-colored plaque, which explained what each work meant. These plaques were written by Mr. Greene's assistant May.

The Mourning of Wealth 2003, read one plaque, *Here we see a figure of the Great Leader Mao asleep as the People care for him.* And indeed, Mao was lain Christ-like, very much in the manner of *The Mourning of Christ*, only the little faces of the angels above him were Chinese, wearing Gucci sunglasses and talking on cell phones.

At Any Cost 2003, *Ex-party members eat delicacies in a Special Economic Zone.* The 'Special Economic Zone' was represented by a white Gothic portico.

Portrait by the Artist, 2003. The face of Li Peng scowled down from under a red headdress.

Needless to say, the pictures sold like hotcakes. In six weeks, Alex and Tim ordered twenty-four more paintings from Mr. Jiang and May, who turned out to be Mr. Jiang's daughter, moved into Alex's apartment, leaving the one Old Mr. Greene got for her on Argyle street empty.

Business was going so well that the partners decided it was time to bump up the gallery's profile. Tim consulted Lillian; he never did anything without consulting Lillian.

"Clearly, the next thing to do is an exhibition," Tim suggested, and Lillian agreed entirely. She called a friend at the Museum of Contemporary Art. 'The Armory' was the only place for a fashionable art-world showing;

anyone who was somebody had an exhibition there, and Mr. Jiang should be no exception.

So, here stood Mr. Jiang under the bright lights of the stage; the Master of Ceremonies continued to flush out the artist's resume:

"Mr. Jiang's work also hangs in the offices of Xi'an Aircraft Industrial Corporation," the MCs teeth gleamed white behind the black microphone and his voice stopped. There came a round, warm sound of applause from the audience. Mr. Jiang nodded and thanked the crowd with very formal language, then surrendered the mike to Tim, who had stepped quietly into the spotlight behind him. Tim explained Mr. Jiang's vision to the crowd:

"Thank you. I never hoped to represent a talent as great as this one- especially as our gallery's maiden exhibition. But *Silk Road* has opened a new vista in the Chicago art world- a vista that has so much to teach us all."

Mr. Jiang's pictures sold like hotcakes, but not without some prodding. The first few paintings were bought by Lillian, who donated them to the right museums. Her charitable act guaranteed an appropriate amount of press. Lillian even threw a dinner party with *The Mourning of Wealth* hung behind the table. Two weeks later, one of her guests bought the picture from Tim's gallery; the guest couldn't believe his luck when he saw that Lillian had sent *The Mourning of Wealth* back. With these few acts, Lillian had set Tim's star alight.

Mr. Jiang never let Alex and Tim down, although the speed at which the master could knock out a collection of paintings made Tim suspect that a small stable of starving artists ghost-painted for him.

"*Silk Road* was only the beginning though," Alex addressed the well-heeled crowd, "Mr. Jiang has brought us something new tonight- something bigger and bolder than what came before. I announce the opening of *Metamorphosis*."

As the word 'metamorphosis' left Tim's lips, the spotlight on him died and lights flooded the stage's background. A giant red canvas, filled with jewel-toned dancers, reminiscent of the *Ballets Russes*, burst into view under the hot lights. Gold leaf glittered on the canvas surface, gem-like beads were glued around the painting's edges with golden gesso; the largest of these beads were back-lit with tiny LEDs. The whole canvas– which stood over two meters high– looked like something out of Aladdin's cave.

"The title of the work behind me is *Egg-1* and is inspired by the famous Easter eggs of Fabergé," Tim let a small tremor enter his voice as he turned toward the riches behind him.

Why market jeweled eggs in Millennial Chicago? Fabergé Eggs had been in the news recently: a Russian oligarch who caught the collector's bug had sent egg prices soaring. "It's a perfect theme for our next collection!" said Mr. Greene, and of course, it was.

Naturally, there were many more *Eggs* in the series- all the way up to *Egg-42*. A steady trickle of *Eggs* were sold through Tim's exclusive gallery; but never more than one at a time, and each for a slightly higher price.

Soon, editorials in art mags bloomed about the excellent return enjoyed by investors who got in on Jiang-*Eggs* early.

And now, that gold-plated artistic wizard stood before his market on the Armory's stage.

Thunderous applause. Tim took a small bow, and left the podium. Ushers opened two stairwells at either side of the stage, and patrons crowded up to get a closer look at *Egg-1*. Tim milled around the guests answering questions; he stayed late into the night. At around 2 a.m. he made his way to a quiet table at the far end of the theater.

"You're a rich man now, darling," Lillian smiled lazily over her martini. Tim grinned back at her; he knew he *would be* rich. A couple of hundred went to Jiang for each painting, but they were selling for many thousands of dollars each. Forty-two times how many grand… Tim was too tired to add it up just now, he gently took Lillian's martini from her hand and finished it with one gulp.

"I'm going to be. Going to be rich," he said. Lillian smiled even wider.

Part V is available here.

LEAVE A COMMENT

YOU ARE NOT A PLANET

An exciting thing happened to me over the weekend. I found a new author who self-publishes on Amazon. Sean Manseau's book, *You Are Not a Planet*, is now one of my favorite short story collections.

I'm also excited about the way I found Manseau's work. After flailing around to find a good source for self-published book reviews, I read a review at selfpublishingreview.com (SPR) by Catherine Tosko. I'm not sure why I was drawn to this particular write-up; it was probably the 1980's 'space-age' graphic.

SPR is a site where you pay $75 to have your work reviewed, which made me skeptical about the reviewer's honesty. However, Tosko's critique seemed thoughtful, so I downloaded *You Are Not a Planet*.

I suspect that Tosko's review was part of a two pronged advertising

attack, because *You Are Not a Planet* was offered for free download on Amazon.com from November 19th-23rd.

Tosko says this about Manseau:

> *It is not often that I pick up a book of short stories with a song in my heart because the genre is just so damn difficult to get right – and when a writer succeeds he then has to stand against the greats such as H.P. Lovecraft, Saki, Angela Carter, Roald Dahl. Why do I mention these names? Because Sean Manseau, the author of You Are Not A Planet could easily line up against them.*

$75 or not, this statement is **absolutely true**.

I'm pretty excited to be one of the first people writing about this guy, because Manseau is going to be a big deal.

What I like most about his writing is that it's good-spirited; this isn't an author motivated by anger or a grudge. It's the writing of a mature person who's had some time to think. The stories are like fairy-tales, but with contemporary, adult themes. Manseau writes smart magic realism.

Here's a quick rundown of some of the best stories:
Who Laughs Last: the demon familiar of a San Fransisco warlock pursues his dream of writing bodice-rippers. Action-packed and quite gory.
–
You Got Old, Too Bad: an aging MTV reality star confronts his own vanity when a cute pick-up turns into a grisly, cannibalistic orgy.
–
I AM THE SUN: Nikola Tesla is reincarnated as a young, orphaned boy who likes to write comic books. Tesla's comic villains come to life and he finds a father, for a while at least.
–
We are Spacelord! And We Command You to Love Us!: A cosmic god of destruction, Spacelord, struggles with his own immaturity and looses.
–
You Are Not a Planet: A geeky teen, with the power to change his mass and save the world, becomes noble.
–
There are more stories and poetry, which are equally good.

Manseau has thought about life, God and love, and his writing feels honest, so this collection has a lot to offer. (I think he may be related to Peter Manseau of killingthebuddha.com) Sean's also written a book titled *The Fool's Daughter and Other Stories*, which I'm just about to start.

All in all, it's been a great weekend for me. Not only have I found a new, great talent *while he's still writing*, but I've learned how to propel a book above the self-publishing noise. May there be more weekends like this one!

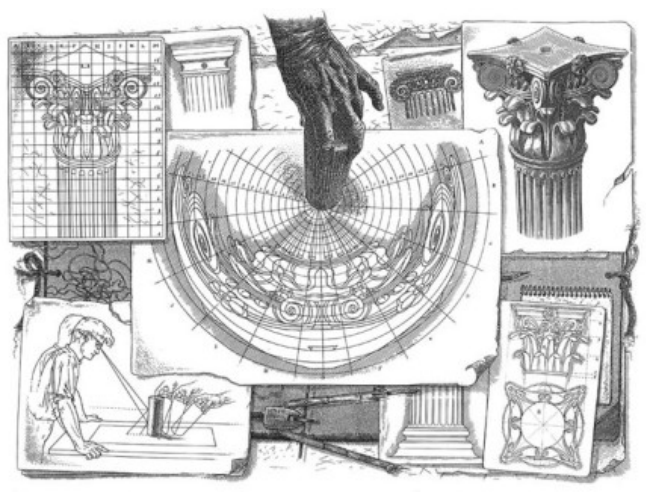
LEAVE A COMMENT

ANAMORPHOSIS

It's interesting how surfaces reflect light. Take, for instance, butterfly wings: they aren't colored, but covered with thousands of tiny prisms, each perfectly aligned and designed to reflect a different frequency of light. The result of this lattice of prisms is *glowing* color, or what physicists call 'structural color'.

Structural color is sometimes used in car paint too, when paint particles are aligned using electric charges so that they're all oriented the same way in space. When light hits these particles, it is reflected uniformly and the car's color is rich and glowing like butterfly wings.

There's another artists' trick using light called 'anamorphosis'; it's when objects are stretched so that they only look natural when viewed at an angle, or through a mirror, or in a convex lens. The following picture, by István Orosz, describes the physics and math behind the 'stretch'.

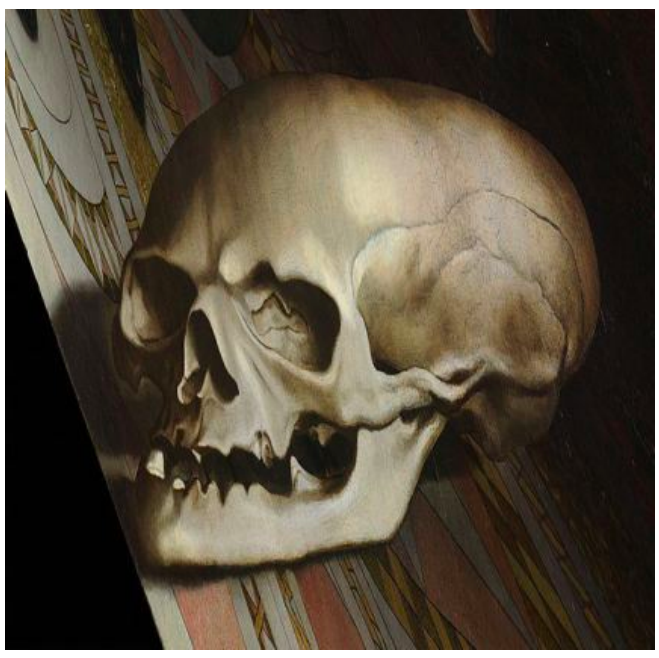


Anamorphosis by István Orosz

Orosz's Anamorph with Column

Why would an artist want to obscure images using anamorphosis? The technique has been around a long time, but gained popularity during the Renaissance, when artists like Leonardo drew his famous eye (1485); when Hans Holbein the Younger worked at the court of Henry VIII (1533); and later in Baroque architectural murals, when Andrea Pozzo painted the ceiling of the Church of St. Ignazio in Rome (1625-50).

Holbein the Younger, The Ambassadors



Skull from The Ambassadors, viewed from an extreme angle.

Anamorphosis didn't regain artistic popularity again until the 20th century; starting with the work of iconoclasts like Marcel Duchamp and *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even*; then attracting a whole crowd of artists after WWII.

Why would these two time periods, the Renaissance and the twentieth century, see a flowering of anamorphism in art? They were both very polarized times, when a new elite consolidated power after a period of struggle. They were both times when a superfluity of money (amongst the ruling class) was available to finance the arts. Also, both were times of extreme religiosity, although the twentieth century crowd might not like to admit it.

Anamorphosis is a self-conscious artistic technique that is motivated by an understanding of how to manipulate the viewer's perceptions- perhaps even a desire to appear 'one step ahead'. Art patrons who support this type of art are very conscious of their role in leading public perceptions, maybe they're more conscious of their power than they are conscientious about how they use it. Nobody would call Henry VIII a man 'for the people'; you can debate what good came from the power-politics of the Protestant Reformation; and people will certainly debate the 'progressive' policies of the 20th century. Whatever your conclusion, the movers-and-shakers of these times had immense faith in themselves and moral certitude- as I said, these are both highly religious eras, and the art of the time reflects that.

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HAUNT, PART III

Part III of a serialized story, view part I and part II.

"You just stood there. Staring." Fiona sat next to his bed; her arms draped along its cold railing. "Your eyes didn't look like you."

"How long was I in there?" Tom removed the oxygen mask from his face. The warm, moist air from the canister made the skin around his mouth feel bloated; as though he'd just come out of a long bath.

"I dunno sweetie. At least 15 minutes, because it took the ambulance that long to find us. I was asleep before then. Do you know when that was?"

Tim tried to remember, but his head hurt and everything before his fall into the cold stream was blurry. It could have been quite a while.

"You looked so stiff- I tried to pull you out but it was like pulling a sack of meat. You teetered. Then I got scared in case you fell and I couldn't keep your head up, so I called them." Fiona paused, then tucked in the blankets around her husband's legs, "How are your feet Tim?".

Tim looked down at his legs: they were double-wrapped and propped up at the end of the hospital bed. "Just numb and tingly now. They gave me something though." They were still giving Tim something; a gently heated liquid entered his veins through a drip at his right wrist. He noticed a box of juice on the bed stand and was immediately thirsty; Fiona didn't have to be asked.

"The doctor said one box every half hour." It wasn't real juice- some sort of Sunny D like product- but it was sweet and felt good on his throat.

"Where's Elsie?"

"She's at your Aunt's. Margo said she'd keep her until you're ready to come home."

"Was she really scared?"

"Well, yes, she was."

Tim closed his eyes. *Great, I've traumatized my daughter on our picnic*, he thought.

"Look, it could have been much worse. Stuff happens and kids bounce back. Maybe there's a silver lining, after all, you're going to be fine now. She'll see that too." Fiona took her husband's hand. His wife's words comforted him somewhat, but anger welled up inside him. *Those goddam memories. Memories coming in and spoiling good times in my life, wrecking my chance to build something real. Something wholesome.*

Tim was both angry and frightened, because the stinging in his legs was proof that he didn't control these dreams. They weren't the ramblings of a stressed mind; they weren't just reflections on his life so far; these memories had some power of their own and Tim couldn't get away from them. He looked over at his wife and wondered if he was strong enough to hold everything together.

***

Elsie's plump little hands grasped at the bud of an Autumn crocus, the flower was luminously purple in the cold afternoon light, it's fiery orange stamen was irresistible to the young girl.

"Ah, delicate, Elsie. Delicate." Aunt Margo's twisted hands gently lead her niece's to a nearby river-pebble, as enticingly smooth as the flower was bright.

"Did your father ever tell you the story of the tulip-babies, Elsie?" The baby looked up and pursed her lips, then offered her great aunt the pebble.

"That's an important story. That crocus, the delicate flower, looks a little like a tulip. But tulips come out in the spring. You haven't seen those yet." The pebble fell to the ground and Elise pulled herself to standing next to the elderly woman.

"There was an old lady- like me- who lived next to a forest in England. She had a garden, just like ours, but she didn't plant vines, roses and cabbages like we have. She let her garden grow just how it wanted to grow and her garden filled itself with tulips." Margo scooped up Elsie and carried her at waist height.

"Fairies need tulips for their babies' cradles, so the fairies were very pleased with the old lady and made sure that good things happened to her." Splat, splat… rain began and Margo started to walk to the porch of her house.

"Then one day the old lady died, like we all will eventually. Her house was sold to a new family, who dug up the tulips and planted vegetables." The rain now drummed heavily on the porch roof.

"The fairies were angry and tried to leave signs for the family to change their ways. The bread wouldn't rise, the beer wouldn't brew…

those sorts of signs. But the family didn't understand. So the fairies tore up the vegetables and made it so no vegetables would grow in that garden again. Then they left- who knows where too. But happiness left the house also."

Brrring. Brrring, Brrring. That noise shocked Elsie, she'd never heard a land-line phone ring before; the baby began to cry. Margo bounced Elsie on her hip and stepped inside to pick up the receiver.

"Hello dear, how is Tim?"

"It seems such a strange…"

"The doctor said that? Really?"

"I can try, but you know how he feels about all of that- and if a person isn't receptive to the signs, well…"

"Why do you say that?" Margo set Elsie in her Pack-and-Play, then covered the child lightly with a blanket.

"So he sort-of knows already. That will make it easier, yes."

"There are more things in heaven and earth."

"Well, the sooner the better, really. It's the emotional damage… yes, come drop off her stuff tonight, then leave Tim with me when you collect Elsie tomorrow. He's blessed to have you, Fiona. How are you feeling?"

The two women continued to talk; the rain fell hard and soft sounds of breathing came from little Elsie as she drifted off to sleep.

Read part IV here.

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OH, HAPPY DAY

Your average day inside the Beltway.

Something wicked is coming to you via *Separate Worlds*… yes, the good people there have picked up my satire/sci-fi story *2BSaved* for the Feb 2013 edition. I guess that the Canadians appreciate tickling their neighbors to the south; I did write the story for ferin'rs.

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